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When the Ground Turns in it’s Sleep

This novel, by Sylvia Sellers-Garcia, is about a man who travels to a different part of the world to learn about his past. Nitido Aman moves to Rio Roto, Guatemala after the death of his father to learn more about his family’s past there. His father, who died of Alzheimer's, and his mother were from Naranjo, Guatemala, and they immigrated to the US when Nitido was three. He grew up knowing nothing about his past, and it was clear his parents were never open to talking about it. College was when Nitido’s curiosity was sparked, and he tried to learn everything he could about Guatemala in that time. He accumulated information like his parents were there during the coup in 1954, but he never got individual stories of their lives, which is all he ever wanted. As his parents were aging, he began looking through journals to gain more knowledge, but he was never satisfied. That’s why, after his father died, he got his mother settled and move down to learn more.

As he arrived, the small town mistakes him for the new priest, which was a role he decided to play along with. The better understand the town, country, and his past, he was going to need to know the secrets and figured the confession was a great place to do that. He soon learned about a lot of cryptic illnesses that the people of Rio Roto were dealing with. Many of them have been living with illnesses and diseases for years, and believed that stemmed from past sin. He spoke with the doctor of the town, who backed that idea up. They also believed that the neighboring town, Naranjo, was the causer of the illnesses, and they were not to be mentioned. Nitido soon decided that a past epidemic was on it’s way back to Rio Roto and everyone’s silence of it was only going to cause trouble.

In fact, silence was what this town did best. Each of Nitido’s conversations he reflected on he felt like he had missed the point. Were the towns members being cryptic based on who they thought he was, a priest, or is this how they’ve all always lived their lives?

After Nitido accidentally marries a couple without the parent’s permission, he flees with a couple friends to Naranjo, where he learns more about the history of Guatemala. This is where his mother and father are from, and he finally meets people who knew them. He learns of beatings and missing people and so much more.

Throughout the book, Nitido tells stories of his childhood and parents along with the interactions he has in Guatemala, which makes the reading more meaningful, but also much more confusing. His last trip to Naranjo was really where *his* story came together. He learned about Guatemala and their struggles as a country, but he also got to learn about his past and family.

The book showed how Nitido’s personal trip to find out about his family turned into him as a priest with a huge influence on the people there. He affected the town there, while all he thought to came down for was for personal benefits.

Overall, the book taught me about Guatemala and how the silences of it’s past can affect a town’s present and future. Things are never as they seem, with good intent to keep it that way. However, these silences cause conflict and tension. It was an intriguing read, although the ending was disappointing and inconclusive. I didn’t fully understand any universal truth to the book, although it was interesting.